

## A COMPARISON OF SELF-CONCEPT AMONG OBESE AND NON-OBESE MALAYSIAN ADOLESCENTS

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### Introduction

Social stigma associated with obesity is widely believed to have a negative effect on an individual's self-concept (Kimm et al. 1991). On a broader perspective, the existence of an inverse relationship between an individual's psychological status and obesity (where greater obesity means a lower status) prevails in the modern society. This effect is assumed to be influenced by the negative cultural view of obesity in almost every civilised culture. Adolescents have been noted to show preference for a mesomorphic build (Dwyer and Mayer, 1968) and to a certain extreme, an anorexic-look, as exhibited by current modelling trends. Coupled by the aversion of general adolescent population toward endomorphic to obese build, such negative view of obesity seemed evident among young-aged individuals. This study compares self-concept measurements of obese and non-obese Malaysian adolescents, with the specific purpose of evaluating levels of self-concept in obese adolescents.

### Materials and Methods

One hundred adolescents (50 males and 50 females; 13-15 age range), from various states in the Peninsular, were randomly included in this study. Classification of obesity was based on Body Mass Index (BMI) measurements. The test instrument used in this study was the Tennessee Self-concept Scale ( $r = 0.90$ ). It provides a multidimensional measure of self-concept profile as follows: (i) identity, (ii) self-satisfaction, and (iii) behaviour, which represent internal self-concept variables, and (iv) physical, (v) ethics-moral, (vi) self, (vii) social, (viii) family, and (ix) self-criticism, which represent external self-concept variables. Combination of these variables yielded 3 response categories with a total of 18 subscales (6 subscales in each category). Participants were required to complete the questionnaire on the same day it was administered. Data were subjected to a 2 x 6 (Group x Self-concept subscale) ANOVA (repeated measures on the second factor) for testing differences among groups. The significance level was predetermined at 0.05.

### Results and Discussion

Comparison of self-concept measures among obese and non-obese Malaysian adolescents yielded significant difference only on the subscale physical/self-satisfaction. Obese measures of self-concept on all other subscales, including physical/identity and physical/behaviour did not reveal any significant deviation from the values obtained from the non-obese group.

This may partially be due to the relative insensitivity of: (a) using only scores of global self-concept measures (as is customary among the published reports); and (b) the measurement of BMI for classification of obesity. On the other hand, this finding provide support to suggestions that the association of obesity to low self-concept is derived mainly from misconceptions of non-obese population toward their obese counterpart, where physiological problems inherent to obesity are generally perceived to elicit negative implications toward the psychological well-being (Bruno, 1992; Kaplan and Wadden, 1986). Development of an individual's self-concept is primarily influenced by significant figures (in this case, family and peer acceptance) (Mead, cited by Purkey, 1970). Our cultural values pertaining social competence and acceptance do not place serious emphasis on one's physical well-being and this may in part, contribute to the similar general self-concept levels among local obese and non-obese adolescents. That the obese respondents in this particular study reported lower self-concept only in the physical aspect of self-satisfaction is in itself encouraging, within the context that subsequent studies on the comparison of psychological profiles between obese and non-obese population may now focus specifically on this particular variable.

### Conclusions

The association between obesity and self-concept in adolescents is not established in this study; obese Malaysian adolescents do not necessarily possess lower self-concept. Physical self-satisfaction represents the only variable where the obese population significantly deviates (in terms of self-concept values) from the non-obese. Further attempts to compare psychological profiles of obese and non-obese Malaysian adolescents should therefore focus on the physical variable.

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